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RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA PRIORITY 0715
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RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 0470
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 0497
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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPT FOR EAP/MTS
PACOM FOR POLAD AND JOC
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SUBJECT: INCREASED GANG ACTIVITY STRETCHES LIMITS OF INTERNATIONAL
POLICE IN DILII

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: There has been a notable increase in disturbances around Dili in recent days, beginning late last week and continuing through today. These have mostly occurred in neighborhoods that have been regular sites of conflict during the last few months. Additionally, there has been a resumption of threats to internally displaced people (IDP) camps, but while in the past these mostly involved loud intimidation only, there have now been more concerted attacks. The incidents have mostly involving stone throwing, but in a number of cases attackers have also been armed with machetes and other sharp-edged weapons. Groups involved have a variety of profiles including local groups of unemployed youth, groups that claim to be protecting their neighborhoods, and martial arts groups and organized gangs. There is a noticeable trend of increased organization among the groups, as well as indications that many have a sense of impunity in their actions. International police resources are reportedly stretched thin in their ability to respond, especially as incidents often occur concurrently, but note that they are adjusting their operations to more effectively address the situation. End summary.

Increased disturbances in Dili

¶2. (U) There has been a marked increase in disturbances, particularly attacks and intimidation tactics carried out by gangs or ad hoc groups of mostly young men. This has been most severe in the Comoro area in western Dili and its adjacent neighborhoods, but has occurred in several other areas as well. There have been a number of reports of injuries, primarily resulting from rock throwing or beatings, but numbers are anecdotal at this point. On Friday, a mob of over 100 attacked the IDP camp at the airport, which has a mostly Lorosae (people from the eastern part of the country) population. The international NGO, Care, also reported repeated attacks over the

weekend on one of their IDP camps by a gang of about 20 men armed with machetes and able to escape quickly on motorcycles. While the attacks on IDP camps have reportedly resulted in few injuries, they are effectively terrorizing the population within. Aid workers are also reporting a number of cases where people who have gone home have been attacked, resulting in their return to the camps. They are concerned that this new spate of gang activity will further underscore the extreme reluctance of most IDPs to return home.

¶3. (SBU) In addition to the IDP camps, examples of the recent incidents include:

- In one of the Comoro neighborhoods, an Embassy staff member reported that four groups staged simultaneous attacks on his neighborhood. However, the community had organized its own security and successfully rebuffed the attacks.
- Staff at the clinic in Bairopite, adjacent to Comoro, have reported nightly intimidation and rock throwing attacks, resulting in some property damage. Over the weekend, an ambulance carrying an injured patient came under a rock throwing attack that resulted in three minor injuries.
- In the Marconi neighborhood, a group of young men, including teenaged and younger boys, has been staging attacks on Lorosae (easterners) houses, causing considerable property damage, for several nights and yesterday morning severely beat a Lorosae man from the Comoro neighborhood.

Profiles of gangs vary

¶4. (U) The profile of the mobs or gangs involved in the attacks, or in other cases in fighting each other, varies. The attack on the airport IDP camp was reportedly carried out by members of a single community after one of their members reported coming under a rock-throwing attack from the camp. Many communities in Dili have organized neighborhood protection groups, some of which have played a positive role in keeping communities intact, while others have taken on a much more negative role as

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indicated in this incident. In the Care IDP camp attack and the incidents in Marconi, smaller groups of 20-30 young men gather on a nightly basis to carry out attacks, often first getting intoxicated on the local Timorese palm liquor. Although most martial arts group leaders are trying to stay clear of the fighting, it is clear that at least sub-groups and members of these groups have also been involved. The attack of four groups simultaneously reported by an Embassy staff member involved members from several well-known martial arts groups. In all cases, there has been a strong Loromonu versus Lorosae (West versus East) element, with Loromonu targeting of Lorosae being the most common.

Trends: increased organization and sense of impunity

¶5. (U) There are a couple trends of note in this recent increase in unrest. First, the various groups seem to have increased their level of organization in carrying out the attacks. International police report that many of the weekend incidents took place nearly simultaneously, indicating coordination. Moreover, groups comprised primarily of unemployed youth, including younger teenage boys, often have cell phones and motorcycles, both normally out of reach luxuries.

¶6. (U) A second trend we have observed is an increased sense of impunity on the part of many perpetrators. There is a sentiment shared among many of them that they can continue to successfully evade arrest and that even if they are arrested, they are likely to be quickly released. This has contributed to a somewhat dismissive attitude towards international police. Over the weekend, US Defense Representative observed a group of young men taunting AFP officers. It is hoped that this perception will change as international police adapt their operations to the new developments (see para 7).

¶7. (SBU) Another factor contributing to a sense of impunity is the widespread reluctance on the part of Dili residents to provide the names of perpetrators, although in many cases they have this information. Residents note their fear of retribution and do not trust that there are sufficient mechanisms in place to protect them. In a meeting yesterday (August 7) with Embassy Charge d'Affaires, Minister for State Administration Anna Pessoa remarked on this issue and reported that she is working with community leaders and the Prosecutor General to make arrangements to ensure confidentiality and witness protection. However, other Embassy contacts note that the fear behind this reluctance is very ingrained and may be difficult to overcome.

International police stretched thin, but adapting

¶8. (SBU) During a security briefing late last week Australian Federal Police (AFP) contingent commander Steve Lancaster reported that the overall situation had quieted down to the point that many police now had time on their hands to pursue lesser crimes. The developments in the days since then appear to have reversed this. A number of international police reported to IDP relief workers over the weekend that they were now spread too thin to address all the security incidents and concerns emerging in the city. During a conversation with Emboff today, acting AFP contingent commander, Tom Dahlstrom, noted that the international police have been flat out since Friday, August 4. He said that the majority of their resources were initially absorbed in reacting to calls and incidents as they occurred, but that they are now endeavoring to shift their focus to proactively pursuing perpetrators, especially gang leaders. He reported that 40 arrests were made over the weekend and an additional 21 last night.

American citizens not being targeted, but risk of cross-fire

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¶9. (SBU) Although American citizens are not a direct target, there is an increased risk of getting caught in the crossfire. An American Embassy family car was hit by rocks yesterday afternoon, apparently being thrown in an altercation between two groups. Additionally, there have been incidents reported of direct attacks on Portuguese targets, probably reflecting the anti-GNR (Portuguese Republican National Guard) sentiment that arose in the wake of the arrest of dissident leader Major Alfredo Reinado earlier this month. The Embassy has sent a warden message to American citizens advising them of the increased security concerns and advising extra caution.
WHITMAN